

## Levett and Braithwaite reply

---

*(In the April issues of New Zealand libraries Allan Levett and Eric Braithwaite published an article "The growth of knowledge and inequality in New Zealand society". The June issue carried invited comments, to which Levett and Braithwaite now reply. The authors, with the Honorary Editor, hope that their arguments will precipitate full debate among librarians and space will be made available in this journal for any forthcoming comments.)*

We are honoured and grateful that three distinguished librarians should comment so fully and promptly upon our report in the April issue of *New Zealand Libraries*. A point immediately obvious from their remarks is that our article in drawing attention to a role libraries play in the growing inequality in New Zealand did not acknowledge the many good things about our library system. We are not in a position to know much about how our libraries are operated; our thoughts on these matters arise mostly from evidence about certain outcomes. But we do recognise that planning for the future must build upon strengths in the existing arrangements as well as take account of recognisable weaknesses. It is good to learn that a New Zealand Library Resources Committee has been reconstituted. What are its policies and sphere of operations? A number of overseas observers have praised the high degree of library co-ordination achieved in this country and we are aware of them. Furthermore, we have benefited ourselves, not only as members of the educated élite but as former child welfare officers working with young people in youth groups and institutions and with their parents in our major cities—people who the evidence suggests are increasingly disadvantaged. We know from this experience that the centralised library arrangements, the inter-library loan system, School Library and Country Library Services certainly offer a measure of accessibility to all kinds of people in the society. (The reduction of town-country inequalities is a much commented upon and

... Allan Levett, senior lecturer in sociology and Asian studies, Victoria University of Wellington, and Eric Braithwaite, senior lecturer in education, University of Auckland, ...

valuable feature. We should note that this is associated with a wealthy and influential farm sector, a fact in keeping with the theory we sketched about advantages accruing to powerful groups.) Our article was not designed to call for services for the specially-disadvantaged only, but to note a trend that affects everyone. We must also say, from the standpoint of our particular knowledge of educationally retarded youngsters, that the appallingly few books written or published for such people in the early 1960s had nothing to do with librarians. In other words, the problem of growing inequality with respect to library resources goes far beyond the manner in which a library system is operated. But we should maintain that there is still a large area in which librarians are, and can be more, influential.

The commentators agree that the evidence—*pace* Mr Cauchi, as dispassionate, "scientific", and precise as limitations of time and resources allowed—does point to a *growing* inequality in the deployment of the nation's book resources and considerable bias in favour of certain groups in the way library services are being used. What it means is not so clear from our enquiry—here we were admittedly tendentious—but our suggestion for further and continuous research by a library unit was not commented upon by our reviewers. Nor were our other proposals much remarked. We didn't say that *all* librarians should become activists—not our word, incidentally, though we do approve of it—but that, as part of a series of changes, a career line be established in which some librarians could specialise in how to make library resources more accessible in the community, thus building up professional recognition for what at present is done by merely occasional innovators. Do we need to wait five years for Mr Cauchi's next report or can we, as Mr McEldowney suggests, call for and encourage more Cauchis? The latter is surely correct in saying that such librarians will not operate alone with their "show-biz", but close to the community, with other organisations, and with the people. These other organisations are working now and they have needed librarians with them for some years already. How often are librarians in on the planning for new towns and new housing areas? How does it happen that Karori gets a new library building while Newlands and Johnsonville are serviced by the periodic visit of a mobile unit? Is this good for the country as a whole? Are librarians concerned and should they have something to say about these recurring patterns? What is the library equivalent of the farm advisory service? (Here we must say the Mr Cauchi's Skinnerian analogy is a false one. We did not say or suggest that because librarians are in fact agents for change it is all right for them to manipulate others. Our plain meaning was that librarians who may think themselves unable to alter an unsatisfactory situation probably underestimate their own influence. And we think that planned, conscious change—like that wrought by Mr Cauchi—in accordance with clear policies of the sort we tried to sketch out, is likely to be more effective than response to the demands of a marketplace.)

Mr McEldowney's remarks suggest cautious, if not timid, answers to these kinds of questions. Is he saying that it is not helpful to call attention to such matters if it makes librarians feel guilty? We can only apologise for any hurt feelings but express a faith in librarians concern for the larger issues. We do not intend to be personal. Does Mr McEldowney himself have such little faith in his profession as to doubt that librarians have the power to make changes? Does he really fear they would be less rather than more appreciated if they tried? We think librarians comprise one of the



few truly service professions and we appreciate them enormously because they bring to our notice and make available a large array of material with which we can exercise choice. But we are part of a privileged minority. Surely librarians would be more widely appreciated if, as a group, they worked to extend important services to more people in the community in the appropriate ways—more than just “labourers and lay-offs”. This will require some of them to argue with town-planners, councilors, and contractors; those who, up to now, have helped make so many of our new communities barren and destructive by leaving out support services to the family and failing to contribute to the building up of neighbourliness and a sense of community. To modify a recent feminist challenge: librarians’ place is in the world.

Mr McEldowney is naturally worried that the important collections he has done so much to help us all understand better will lose out if library resources were to be more equitably shared in New Zealand. We will have something to say on this point later. In his comment on our article Mr McEldowney gives a brief justification for educated élites requiring very large collections: the case is eloquently and more fully argued in his report *New Zealand university library resources 1972*. We will not dispute this requirement. We are primarily concerned how knowledge is made available and used; especially how the educated person, including the librarian, may use knowledge for the good of the whole society. Mr McEldowney sketches a transmission process whereby knowledge is carefully radiated by various interpreters from a central fount. It was a good way for our agriculture, he points out. This has been called a centre-periphery model (for example by Donald Schon in his B.B.C. Reith lectures published as *Beyond the stable state*), shown to derive from a pattern established by centralised administrative élites such as the British Civil Service during the days of empire or, more ominously perhaps, the Russian Communist Party. It is a less accurate account of how new ideas and knowledge have actually been disseminated in the history of societies and it may not be the best model for present conditions. The spread of knowledge of the teachings of Jesus in the Roman Empire is an early example of an alternative pattern. Here too there were interpreters but they did not operate from the centre of established conventional wisdom. Schon notes the decline of the centre-periphery mode in modern societies and invokes the metaphor of networks to describe more precisely what is happening. The net suggests a special kind of interconnectedness where each element is connected to others independently rather than through the centre. The network model is more likely to enhance the kind of diversity Mr Cauchi is concerned about and, as applied to libraries, suggests the widest availability of resources. The danger of the centre-periphery model lies precisely in the kinds of control over interpretation exercised by élites who thereby occupy a paternalistic role which they will seek to maintain. They can create mystification about their position and are seen as distant, removed. Their very role and the way it is exercised encourages pacification among outsiders of lower status, e.g. “leave it to the experts”.

The example of the way agriculture was developed in New Zealand is misleading. One consequence of the improvements was to promote the flow of rural workers to the cities. And here, where no such exit is possible, the same model used by social workers has not been successful. The growth in the number and sophistication of social workers in New Zealand has been accompanied by increasing signs of social distress: more de-

linquency, crime, mental breakdown, and more inequality. This is not to deny that individual social workers have been helpful. We are referring to a lack of success at the level of the institution, the profession as a whole. If the experience has any relevance to library work, merely patching on a few community librarians to the present structure will not on its own markedly affect the trends we have reported. A clear cut policy for more egalitarian library development is surely of the first and greatest importance. There will be many ways to implement such a policy and, if the central co-ordinating committee is open-minded, facilitative, and accountable, alternatives will emanate not only from it.

There is a persistent anti-intellectualism in New Zealand that is no doubt fed and sustained by paternalistic and mystifying ways in which we members of the educated élite behave. In this connection it may be noted that those people Mr McEldowney mentions who "decided to try to make New Zealand a place fit for people to live in" helped to bring about the situation that concerns us now. But Mr McEldowney is being pessimistic if he thinks we are mounting a pogrom against the custodians of the large library collections. On the contrary we would contend that the more books are widely available and appreciated in the community, the more the great collections will benefit. Marx needed a British Museum in which to write his great works and a lot of ordinary working class people used to know about that—even though they couldn't read German. It is doubtful if so many have equivalent awareness any more in New Zealand and the trends we documented suggest there will be even fewer in the future. In our view the trends will not be halted by mere bulletins and field days and more of those precious, awful, academic book reviews over the radio in which the élite experts interpret for the people.

Let the people decide for themselves. To do that they must have the opportunity in the first place. Librarians, above all others, because their service is more direct, with less intermediary interpretation, can help ensure that opportunity.